

Michigan Senate Judiciary Committee  
Chairman, Senator Wayne Kuipers  
May 5, 2009

Chairman Kuipers:

I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on Senate Resolution No. 41 regarding the implementation of nondenominational prison congregation programs within the facilities of the Michigan Department of Corrections.

I serve as a pastor/developer of such a congregation now in existence at the Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility known as "Celebration Fellowship." I am pleased to report to the committee that it has been in existence since November 3, 2008.

My testimony will highlight the cooperation and the collaboration that Celebration Fellowship prison congregation has received from officials in the Michigan Department of Corrections. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize how the role of a prison congregation program can compliment the work of chaplains and coordinate its work with the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative.

It was last year on March the 28<sup>th</sup> at the suggestion of DOC officials that some members of the launch team for the prison congregation met with you, Senator Kuipers, in Grand Rapids to brief you and inform you of the cooperation that we were receiving from the DOC regarding the development of the prison congregation. In the notes that I compiled for you of that meeting I indicated that Deputy Director Dennis Schrantz was fully supportive of the prison congregation model as a way to effectively mobilize community and faith based programming. In fact, DOC at the time was engaging the religious community in a series of focus group meetings to formalize in a position paper its on-going working relationship with the faith-based community.

Shortly after the March meeting a presentation about the prison congregation model, DOC had its Chaplains Advisory Council (CAC) review the prison congregation plan and its objectives. Upon approval by the CAC, a meeting was convened in August of 2008 in Ionia

where a large delegation of DOC officials discussed a plan to implement a prison congregation at Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility.

During these start-up efforts the DOC provided critical support for the development of the prison congregation model. Such support continues today as Warden Kenneth McKee recently hosted a "Volunteer Appreciation Night" for all volunteers at Ionia Bellamy Creek including the 55 volunteers who are partnering with the inmates in the prison congregation at Ionia known as Celebration Fellowship.

Charles Honey, writer for the Grand Rapids Press, points out in the April 2009 issue of an article he wrote for "Christianity Today" that "unlike traditional prison ministries, prison congregations form worship communities governed by councils that include inmates." He goes on to explain that "the congregation gives responsibility to the inmate, and so the inmate actually is learning leadership." I like to say that we are training inmates to become leaders and prepare for life after prison. Mr. Honey pointed out in the article that the potential for helping ex-prisoners reenter communities is what prompted the Michigan Department of Corrections to approve the prison congregation.

I am pleased to report that we are making progress. We are engaging now in an evaluation of the work. The inmates are even involved as they respond to questions such as: Why are you coming to the prison congregation? Has it been helpful in preparing you for your return to your home? Do you want a prison congregation mentor to work with you when on parole?

Furthermore, volunteers have been challenged in evaluating their involvement in their study (table discussions of Rick Warren's book "The Purpose Driven Life") and worship with the men. Hopefully, after further training the 55 partner-members (volunteers) of Celebration Fellowship will be mentors of the men even while inside the prison. Even now we have anecdotal evidence that the seven former inmate-members of Celebration Fellowship have successfully made a transition to support partners in the community via jobs, and supportive social networks.

All of us are encouraged by your resolution to support the prison congregations programming model. I serve on the national board of directors of Prison Congregations of America. Please note some of the roles of their work:

**What a Prison Congregation IS:**

- A means of involving members of main-line churches in prison ministry: visiting, volunteering, providing transition companionship.
- A congregation of a main-line denomination, but ecumenical in its approach, possibly sponsored by more than one denomination.
- An effort to "partner" the inmate church to the outside church. Involvement of inmates in worship, study, and mission projects is encouraged as in any church.
- An additional worship to an institution's chapel program from a sacramental/liturgical perspective—offering weekly communion.
- The means of providing a seasoned, ordained clergy for working half-time within the institution (s) and half-time developing, educating, and guiding a supportive network in a reentry community.
- It is a prison ministry organized and funded in its entirety by outside sources.

**What a Prison Congregation IS NOT:**

- An effort to proselytize inmates from one faith group to another. Most inmates can be involved.
- A magnet for lawsuits... In over 20 years no prison congregation has been sued, named in a lawsuit against an institution, or whose existence was used an argument for another ministry's entry into an institution.
- A replacement for a chaplain. The responsibilities of the prison congregation pastor are spent ministering to and developing support for the prison congregation members in the prison and in the aftercare community. Everything a chaplain does still needs to be done.

**What the Prison "Inside" Congregation Does:**

- Active in worship as ushers, readers, prayers, assisting in communion, helping in music, setting up/taking down worship area, offering donations
- Welcoming guest members, interacting with "outside" members via fellowship
- Establish a council that will make programmatic decisions, as much as possible, and meet with the "outside" steering committee or representatives twice a year.

**What the "Outside" Network of Partner Churches does:**

- Worship with prisoners in supporting ministries in the prison and community, appoint up to 12 members who will serve in various capacities such as worship services, prayer partners, letter-writing, mentors, and on reentry aftercare teams
- Train and support members to be effective volunteers and mentors
- Members learn and apply the practices and principles of restorative justice to the problems of crime in our communities in order to reconcile and restore victims and offenders where possible, and to effect, as far as possible, the establishment of justice for all members of our societies (Source: Christian Reformed Church Committee to Study Restorative Justice 2005).

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Senate Resolution No. 41 and for other ways that the Judiciary Committee of the Senate seeks to work with DOC and the community and faith based communities.

I look forward, as many do, with the launching of DOC's efforts to train congregations to become "healing communities" that welcome and support "returning citizens" in churches and other places of worship to be designated as "Stations of Hope. The work of the Michigan Department of Corrections during these difficult days to connect with the faith based communities of Michigan is to be commended. I am thankful to be a part of your efforts as leaders in government and to work cooperatively with the DOC. Thanks for your efforts to expand the prison congregation program model that is already at work and under review for greater impact on the lives of so many of our citizens.

Sincerely,



Richard Rienstra  
Pastor/Developer  
Ionia Celebration Fellowship Congregation  
Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility

Encl: "Worship Behind the Razor Wire" Christianity Today April 2009  
"Getting to Church by Way of Prison" "The Banner" May 2009

of Tearfund, a British aid organization that has become the poster child for evangelical work on climate change, Malawi evangelicals proactively build dikes to fend off floodwaters and plant drought-resistant crops.

"When [in the West] you talk from theory and your knowledge is from books, you have time to delay," said Kamchacha. "In my country, we cannot afford to delay. We need to act now." • Ruth Moon

#### [CHURCH LIFE]

## Worship Behind the Razor Wire

A growing number of prison churches offer community for convicts.

Two dozen men in orange and blue prison suits came forward, singing a spiritual as they received Communion from two ordained ministers.

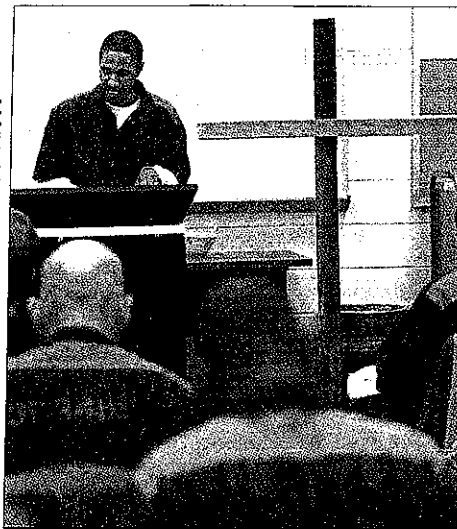
"Hallelujah, we're going to see the King," they sang in warm baritone voices. Theirs was joyful worship at Celebration Fellowship, a church founded late last year inside the Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility in Ionia, Michigan.

In this prison congregation, affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, convicted murderers and drug dealers read Scripture, lead prayers, and sing hymns with volunteers from nearby churches.

"They treat us like human beings," inmate Eric Jewell, 41, said of the visitors. "You can feel the sincere love they have for us."

The first prison congregation in Michigan is one of a small but growing number of officially established churches helping inmates find faith behind the razor wire.

Unlike traditional prison ministries, prison congregations form worship



Inmates gather for worship at a prison in Ionia, Michigan.

communities governed by councils that include inmates. Inmates hold church offices, help plan services, distribute Communion, and even tithe from their meager earnings.

"A congregation gives responsibility to the inmate, and so the inmate actually is learning leadership," said Regan Beauchamp, pastor of Prison Lighthouse Fellowship at the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls. "They are learning how to connect better with one another and be accountable."

Located in a maximum-security unit, the Baptist General Conference church is affiliated with Prison Congregations of America (PCA), a nonprofit based in Mitchell, South Dakota, that was incorporated in 1994 with support from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Its 14 congregations also include ELCA, United Methodist, and Disciples of Christ churches led by civilian pastors.

Key is finding area churches to share in worship, financially support the pastor, and work with inmates who leave prison, said Mary Mortenson, PCA executive director.

"When the person walks out of prison, they have a connection on the outside," Mortenson said. "Often that positive connection is the difference for them between making it or reoffending."

The potential for helping ex-prisoners reenter communities prompted the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) to approve the Ionia prison church as a pilot project of its Prisoner Reentry Initiative.

By pairing inmates with church mentors, the program "offers a wonderful opportunity for that bond of a shared faith to continue outside the walls of the prison," said Michael Martin, head of chaplains for MDOC.

Church officials stress that prison congregations aim to complement other

ministries. While Bible studies and worship services led by outside groups can provide spiritual uplift, congregations give inmates a community to return to after "the last strum of that guitar," Mortenson said.

"What's in it for them is the same thing that's in it for you and me," she said. "There's a constancy."

Charles Colson's Prison Fellowship, which sends more than 22,000 volunteers into 1,800 prisons each year, is not affiliated with prison congregations but is compatible with them, said president Mark Earley. The ministry has started a pilot program with the Urban Ministry Institute of Los Angeles to train inmates how to plant churches in their prisons.

At prisons where it is difficult to get outside volunteers, prison church members "can exercise leadership in bringing men or women together and organize them around holy living," Earley said. "They are functioning as the body of Christ locked behind prison walls." • Charles Honey

#### [PUBLISHING]

## Book Brouhaha

Encyclopedia of Christian history withdrawn; editor alleges censorship.

It's uncertain when, or if, the *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* will reach bookstore shelves, but the delayed release of the four-volume work fueled debate about possible suppression of Christian academics by secular publishers.

Scholarly publisher Wiley-Blackwell's decision to withdraw the encyclopedia after it was printed and debuted at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in November ignited the controversy.

Editor George T. Kurian e-mailed the encyclopedia's nearly 400 contributors in February and called the decision "probably the first instance of mass book-burning in the 21st century." According to Kurian, president of the Encyclopedia Society and editor of 60 reference works, the encyclopedia was delayed because four critics called it "too Christian, too orthodox, too anti-secular, and too anti-Muslim, and not politically correct enough for being used in universities."

Kurian said changes requested by Wiley—including removal of terms such as *B.C./A.D.*, *Virgin Birth*, and *Resurrection*—were "the most blatant form of censorship in the history of religious publishing."

continued on page 16

**Resigned •** *General Secretary* • general secretary of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, on February 13 after confessing to misconduct.



**Elected •** *President* • as president of Oral Roberts University. Rutland, former president of Southeastern University in Lakeland, Florida, will fill the void left by

Richard Roberts, who resigned in November 2007 amid charges of financial wrongdoing.

FULLER, COURTESY OF HABITAT FOR HUMANITY; RUTLAND, COURTESY OF ORU

## NEWS CORRESPONDENTS

All correspondents can be reached by e-mail via the Banner's webpage: [www.thebanner.org](http://www.thebanner.org)

**Gayla R. Postma, News Editor**  
613-543-3603  
E-mail: [gpostma@crcna.org](mailto:gpostma@crcna.org)  
Fax: 613-543-3041

**Christian Bell**  
Classes Grand Rapids East and North,  
Thornapple Valley  
616-304-1050

**Jenny deGroot**  
Classes BC North-West, BC South-East  
604-888-5505

**Paul Delger**  
Classes Central Plains,  
Northcentral Iowa, Lake Superior,  
641-762-3684

**Eileen De Vries**  
Classes Kalamazoo, Lake Erie  
616-281-6765

**Ruth Moblard De Young**  
Classes Chicago South, Illiana  
708-687-2354

**Alice Durfee**  
Classes Rocky Mountain, Yellowstone  
303-300-1909

**Doug Evenhouse**  
Classes Northern Illinois, Wisconsin  
630-241-0735

**Karen Gorter**  
Classes Holland, Zeeland, Northern  
Michigan, Muskegon  
616-399-6123

**Calvin Hulstein**  
Classes Atlantic NE, Hackensack, Hudson  
860-644-8512

**Jonathan J. Kim**  
Classis Pacific Hammi.  
626-616-0411

**Jack Klumpenhower**  
Classes Red Mesa, Arizona  
970-259-9744

**Sherry Kooiker**  
Classes Heartland, Lakota, Minnkota  
712-725-2033

**Rachel deKoning Kraay**  
Classes Alberta North, Alberta South &  
Saskatchewan  
403-782-9917

**Sophie Vandenberg**  
Classes Hamilton, Niagara, Toronto  
905-796-3063

**Roxanne Van Farowe**  
Classis Southeast U.S.  
919-477-2084

**Brenda Visser**  
Classes Eastern Canada, Quinte  
613-924-1792

**Heidi Wicker**  
Classes Greater L.A., Central California,  
California South  
209-599-3799

**Carolyn Yost**  
Classes Georgetown, Grandville,  
Grand Rapids South  
616-662-4191



PHOTO BY T.J. HAMILTON. COPYRIGHT 2009 THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. USED WITH PERMISSION.

## Getting to Church by Way of Prison

**I**t's a midwinter Monday night in Michigan, and a group of people are on their way to church.

In the middle of rural Ionia County, they walk past an abundant crop of barbed wire fences and are herded in small groups of five or six into a small sterile room.

They empty their pockets. No metal pens are allowed; only see-through plastic ones. They hold out their arms, walk through a metal detector, and then receive a full-body pat-down. Each is given a small black box with a bright-red button—it's an alarm and locator device. Just in case.

The air is crisp and cold as they walk through the dark yard to be escorted into building 300, where a squadron of closed-circuit cameras monitors their every move.

The congregation is already assembled and facing the front; deep baritone voices sing "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." The latecomers find places to sit at tables among them.

So begins another weekly service of Celebration Fellowship Congregation at the Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility, the only Christian Reformed church located entirely within a prison.

Every Monday night 30 to 35 inmates come to this makeshift sanctuary to study and worship,

The weekly service of Celebration Fellowship CRC at the Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility.

joined by 10 to 15 visitors from local Michigan churches who partner with them and commit to attending every week so that relationships can be built.

Everyone takes out a copy of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and for the next hour the congregants read through a chapter and talk through a list of questions that the inmates compiled.

When it comes time for the sermon, Rev. Rich Rienstra takes the pulpit. Rienstra was called by Church of the Servant CRC in Grand Rapids, Mich., to lead this new congregation. Rienstra's work with jail ministries goes back to his first ministry in the 1970s when he was a young pastor fresh out of seminary. But prison ministry has a personal dimension for him; his own son is an inmate in a Michigan prison.

Rienstra explains that the ministry is training inmates to

## Banner Writer Needed

Do you have the WRITE stuff? *The Banner* is looking for a news correspondent in southwestern Ontario to write about Christian Reformed people and activities of interest to our readers. We'd especially welcome writers from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

All expressions of interest should be sent via e-mail to Gayla Postma, news editor, at [gpostma@crcna.org](mailto:gpostma@crcna.org). Please submit a short resume, including your writing experience, and two recent samples of your work.

become leaders and prepare for life after prison. "We're grooming the future elders and deacons of the church," he said. "Our highest priority is making disciples."

In many ways the worship service is like any other—people yawn occasionally and shift in their seats, they recite the Apostles' Creed together. There's even a children's prayer. Though no children are present, many of the men have families outside the walls.

When it comes time for the offering, an older inmate named Mike sings "Jesus, Jesus, There's Just Something About That Name." The other inmates quietly join in the repeating chorus. An empty bowl is passed around to gather the inmates' written prayers and hopes, as they have no money to give.

One of the visitors is Adria Libolt, a retired prison warden. "I never dreamed I'd want to come back [to a prison]," Libolt said. During the Bible study before the worship service, a prisoner seated at Libolt's table asks her, "Do you consider yourself God's friend?"

"Prisoners didn't use to say things to me like that," she explained. "It was really moving."

Afterward, the visitors are free to go. They walk back to their cars and slowly drive away. Back behind the barbed wire, the Spirit of God remains.

—Christian Bell

## Organist Featured on PBS

Benton Blasingame, the organist for Rochester Christian Reformed Church in Penfield, N.Y., was recently one of the featured organists at a concert to be broadcast on *Pipedreams Live!*, a PBS program that airs on 150 stations across the United States.

Blasingame is a first-year student at the highly acclaimed Eastman School of Music and a recent graduate of the Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan. He has won numerous awards, including first prize in the high school division

**Benton Blasingame at the Hal-loran-All Saints Organ at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Rochester, New York**

of the 2007 Albert Schweitzer Organ Competition.

Blasingame says he felt privileged to be part of *Pipedreams Live!* because the program, hosted by Michael Barone, helps keep the organ world alive, interesting, and exciting.

—Calvin Hulstein



STEVE TRYON

## Nebraska Inmates Lend a Hand



**Inmate Bill White repairs a car.**

Inmates at a minimum security prison in Lincoln, Neb., are volunteering time while doing time. Several of them have partnered with Northern Lighthouse Christian Reformed Church to form Charity Autos, a car repair service for people who can't afford repairs elsewhere.

Steven Oliver loves helping people. On Saturdays he is one of seven or eight inmates who donate labor to repair cars for single moms, seniors, and people who have disabilities.

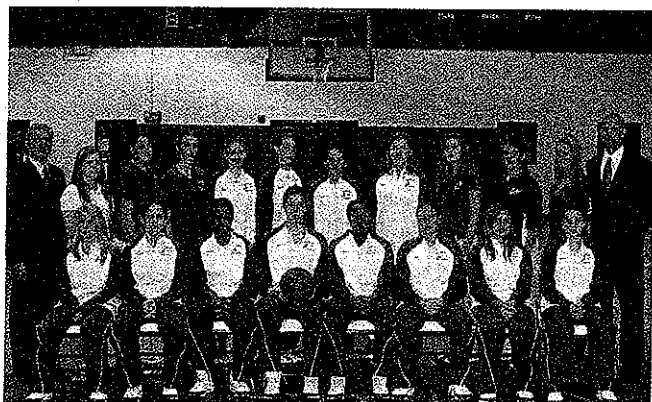
"It's a good feeling to know that you have helped someone at the end of the day and got them on the road," said Oliver.

He heard about the program while worshipping at Northern Lighthouse. "I feel like I am doing the Lord's work through auto mechanics and also helping people who are in need," he said.

Northern Lighthouse CRC was originally established as a typical church in a new housing development, according to ministry associate Jeff Heerspink. But a prisoner-release program brought inmates in to worship. When one prisoner expressed a wish for work to do, a car was repaired and a ministry was born.

"I think one of the most beautiful pieces of the Charity Autos program is there's a number of people who show up and say, 'I want nothing to do with church, but I can work on a car,'" said Heerspink. "And then they get to know some of the members of Lighthouse. The inmates find a loving, caring place. Then they say, 'Well, I'll come to church,'" he said. "A lot of them find Christ."

—Sherry Kooiker



**Florida Champs** The Lake Worth (Fla.) Christian High School girls' basketball team won the state championship for its division. This first-ever championship title coincided with the school's 50th anniversary. Though several teams came close to winning state titles, "It's been a great experience for everybody that we were finally able to make it happen," said athletic director Jim Harwood. Team member Antishia Wright, named Most Valuable Player, has accepted a full scholarship to play basketball for West Virginia University next year. Lake Worth's girls' coach, Carlos Palacios, was named "Florida 1A Coach of the Year" by the *Palm Beach Post* and the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*.

—Roxanne Van Farowe